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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Subcommittee Reviews VA's Plan to Decrease Disability Claims Backlog

WASHINGTON, D.C.—This week, the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) held a hearing to review the Administration's Fiscal Year 2013 VA budget request as it pertains to the Veterans Benefit Administration, National Cemetery Administration, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and American Battle Monuments Commission.

The hearing marked the second time in as many days that VA officials testified in front of members of the Committee about their proposed budget for FY2013. Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Jon Runyan (NJ-3) was hopeful that VA's goal this coming year to attempt to decrease the disability claims backlog, which has been growing exponentially the past three years, would work. "I am pleased to learn that VA shares in this endeavor in bringing VA into the 21st Century, as reflected in the 2013 budget. Timely processing of claims is the very least we can do for our nation's veterans."

Chairman Runyan also applauded VA for their proposed use of technology as a way to eliminate the backlog; however, he cautioned against the dangers of thinking that technology alone will solve this problem. "Technology alone will not solve the issues pertaining to the backlog. It is our solemn responsibility to remain vigilant," Runyan said. "We will continue to oversee these programs to ensure that they are operating efficiently while also serving the needs of our nation's veterans. Although VA continues to emphasize its initiatives in the area of people, process, and technology; it is important that VA follow through on these programs while not forgetting its primary goal of providing timely, quality benefits to veterans."

A second major component addressed at the hearing was a recent audit conducted at National Veterans Cemeteries, revealing mismarked graves and improper burials. Runyan commended the National Cemetery Administration for their quick response, but repeated his charge that "no mistake going forward will be acceptable. We owe this commitment in honoring our veterans and their families that they rest in peace."

In these tight fiscal times, VA has proposed a 10.5% increase for FY2013. "We face a deficit crisis and we must act to be prudent stewards of our budget for generations yet born to ensure the survival of our common American values," Runyan said. "But this should not, and will not, come at the expense of our veterans and the sacrifices they have made to ensure we remain the strongest and freest country on the face of the earth."

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